

BORROWED MUSIC FOR SOLO ALTO TROMBONE:
A PRACTICAL AND HISTORICAL GUIDE

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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Borrowed Music for Solo Alto Trombone:
Practical and Historical Guide

This creative project involves arranging, and performing, a transcription of a work that was originally composed for a solo instrument and piano, into one for alto trombone and piano. I have self-published my own electronic edition of Camille Saint-Saëns' *Romance in E Major Op. 67* and performed it twice.¹ The piece was originally for horn (or violoncello) and piano. I used the solo part for violoncello and the piano score (shared by horn and violoncello versions) to create an edition of Saint-Saëns' work arranged to be idiomatic for performance on the alto trombone. The main focus of the project is the process of transcribing and arranging with an emphasis on establishing an editorial best practice guide for the preparation of certain types of solo alto trombone literature.

Accomplishing these objectives required developing a high level of musicianship with the instrument, preparing a performance edition of a musical work, and synthesizing those two creative processes in a recital performance. The success of the edition depends on developing a multi-methodological understanding of musical treatments of the alto trombone and applying that understanding to create a musical score for piano and alto trombone. The final score is based on the music borrowed from Camille Saint-Saëns above; it is from the repertoire for a solo instrument and piano.

Peter Burkholder describes "borrowing" in this sense as "the use of existing music as a basis for new music," and says the practice "is pervasive in all periods and traditions."² For my

¹ Camille Saint-Saëns, "Romance in E Major Op. 67," in *Romanzen: Für Horn Und Klavier; Fassung Für Violoncello*, ed. Dominik Rahmer, Urtext ed. (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 2012), 5-17.

² Burkholder, J. Peter, "Borrowing," *Grove Music Online*, Accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/52918>.

edition of the Saint-Saëns I relied on an electronic edition,³ putting it into a computer notation program, and making editorial changes to suit the alto trombone. That process is discussed in depth below. Burkholder's definition of borrowing suits the purposes of this paper very well, but other terms that are part of the process merit explication.

Though my method is straightforward, the wonders of music have provided a source of potential confusion about the title of the process I followed. There are several different terms to describe the process accurately. Phillip D. Crabtree and Donald H. Foster provide the succinct definitions of "arrangement," "edition," and "transcription" that explain my decision to call my process "borrowing" as Burkholder describes. An arrangement is defined as a "reworking of a musical composition so that the performing forces, the musical content, or the form are substantially different from the original." An edition is the "presentation of an older musical composition in a version that makes it accessible to modern performers," while a transcription is both "the transliteration of an early work into modern musical notation" and the product of adapting a composition "to a medium other than its original one."⁴

The product of this project is all of these things. It is a new edition of Saint-Saëns' historic work, a reworking of the composition that is substantially different, and a transliteration of a work into modern musical notation. While I did not add new measures of music, several sections did require significant arrangement to fit alto trombone. The whole of the work was transposed down a half step from its original E major. This was in order to be in a key as natural to the trombone (Eb minor) as E minor is to the violoncello. To my mind, "borrowing" most

³ Camille Saint-Saëns, *Romance, Op. 67*. (J. Hamelle, 1885), <http://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/30590>.

⁴ Phillip Crabtree and Donald H. Foster, *Sourcebook for Research in Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 2-7.

clearly encompasses all of these terms into one process. The reader is invited to replace the term with their favored terminology. A rose by any other name . . .

Additionally, this paper discusses issues from related methodologies that arise in the production of the score, such as editing, orchestration, transcription, arranging, organology, and performance practice. Following are two main sections, one considering practical aspects of creating the score and the instrument, the other considering the history of the instrument and its repertoire.

Practical Considerations

The trombones, particularly the alto, are increasingly specialized instruments. This is especially true in light of the easy availability of computer and mechanical instruments that durably sound precise and accurate notes, and with perfect intonation at the press of a button. These electronic instruments then send a signal to an amplifier that powers a speaker to sound the tone. Contrastingly, brass instruments like trombone require the trained, athletic, use of one's facial-musculature as the physical source of the sound vibrations. All brass music is powered by the vital energy of the musician's breath. The trombone colors and amplifies that vibration into its characteristic tone via a brass, conical architecture. This is inherently more human and prone to inconsistency than even a free MIDI-synthesizer application installed on a modern smartphone. Effective performances with trombone are achieved through focused training and practice.

While it is one the most widely used instruments across the contemporary soundscape, the trombone is among the oldest and most unaltered instruments in modern usage. The

trombone family of instruments has been traced as far back as 1470 in Germany.⁵ Traditions of performance from Germany survive to this day, when one can hear a Moravian church trombone choir in performance in Los Angeles, California, on a regular basis.⁶ Church choirs are influential in the development of the various members of the trombone family, as each member was created in order to double the various parts of the chorus based on the human voice. Thus there are soprano, alto, tenor, bass, and contrabass trombones.

The alto trombone is built so that the foundational pitch is six semitones higher than that of a tenor trombone. The tenor trombone is what is thought of as the regular trombone. Alto trombones are shorter and have a smaller bore to create the difference of a perfect fourth in foundational pitch between themselves and tenor trombones. Most contemporary composers, trombonists, and directors prefer to utilize the tenor trombone, whose upper range includes that of the alto. The two instruments do have slightly different sounds, however, and the strength and power of the tenor is not always necessary or appropriate to a piece of music. This is especially true when the composer writes the piece to be performed on an alto trombone. The tone and character of the alto trombone are intrinsically valuable for their own beauty.

Modern bass trombones have the same foundational pitch of the tenor trombone, with a wider bore and additional length (contained in valve sections) to access a broader, and chromatic, low range. Each trombone's distinctive hand-slide covers seven semitones; the slide changes the length of the instrument between seven different basic pitches worth of length. Thankfully, due to the natural constitution of matter in our bodies and the trombone, the instruments are not

⁵ Herbert, Trevor, "Trombone," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed April 7, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2252542>.

⁶ Personal experience of the author, involving a rehearsal with Moravian Trombone Choir of Downey (a suburb of Los Angeles), led by Steven Humenski, in Fall 2013.

limited to a range of just seven pitches. All brass instruments can play a series of pitches in each different setting called the overtone series (often called position, or fingering on valve instruments). Because the alto is the shortest of these trombones, the most resonant and tuneful use of the slide demands a more accurate placement of the slide in a more precise way than with a tenor or bass trombone.

The alto is somewhat lighter in tone than its larger cousins, the tenor and bass trombones. A trombonist with an alto is more able to sound pitches in and above the upper limits of those family members with more ease. Furthermore, because of its shorter and lighter slide mechanism, a trombonist may more ably demonstrate greater agility in florid passages than other trombones. Of course, it is a trombone, and requires unique use of the arm and hand in coordination. Composers and performers have long compared the ease of performance musicians on keyed, fretted, or bowed, instruments have in florid, rapid passages of notes with the difficulty a trombonist might have with the same passage. A composer or arranger who understands the particular intervallic connections in the trombone's overtone series and the actual mechanical process of performance will take advantage of the instrument rather than be limited by it. This strategy will create the most successful works for the alto trombone.

Technological improvements in the instrument, led by American manufacturers like Charles Gerard Conn, beginning in 1879, led composers to write more difficult music for the trombone family.⁷ Trombones today benefit from computer-aided design, centuries of refinement, and economies of scale for significant competition among major manufacturers spread across the world. Many trombones have valves added that make the instrument even more

⁷ Herbert, *ibid.*

fluid to operate. Valves make it possible to play a lower chromatic range and ease the performance of certain notes. Alto trombones occasionally, tenors often, and modern bass and contrabass always require valve mechanisms.

Furthermore, lubricants and maintenance materials for the slide are at the pinnacle of their development and are more readily available than in any other period of time in history. A trombonist today thus utilizes a hand slide that is smoother and faster to operate because of its construction and design and the maintenance materials at hand.

The entire instrument has been under development for more than 500 years. The trombone of today is capable of much more acrobatic, expressive musical work than it has ever been previously. Saint-Saëns was not being unreasonable when he chose to write his *Romance* for violoncello, with a somewhat simplified version for the horn. The trombones of his years were lacking essential developments in materials and pedagogy. Trombonists have always taken advantage of a singing tone and articulative style due to their origins in doubling the voice. The instrument's pre-existing assets have broadened from that singing tone to include more fluidly connected melodic motion, and a wider range in terms of both octaves and dynamics. These new strengths create a potential to borrow from the music of other instruments from the past.

Rapid, florid passages of music are more difficult to perform on trombones than some other instruments, but there are certain advantages to the instrument and its tone that necessitate its continued presence on bandstands, in orchestra halls, opera pits, popular music recordings, as well as movie and television scores. While an accurate survey is impossible for our purposes, there are very few instruments that are so necessary a part of such a diverse repertoire of musics.

Taking wider advantage of the alto trombone's increased range is an open opportunity for musicians today.

Additionally, technological developments beyond the instrument, namely technology such as the microphone, greatly alters the uses and abilities of the instrument in musical culture. Tommy Dorsey is the musician who embodies this technological development.⁸ In the 1920s Dorsey led the way amongst trombonists by taking advantage of the microphone. The trombone so naturally sounds large, stentorian tones, that its more sensitive capacities had been overshadowed. Trombonists in performance had previously tended to be typecast as characters who shout at a distance.

Dorsey was able to whisper and coo on record in conversational, singing tones. The microphone's newfound ability to capture and transmit those utterances opened up the possibilities for performance with the trombone (and other instruments). The difference between amplified or recorded and unamplified performances created a new setting for trombonists like Dorsey. The marching bands and massed settings of trombones necessary for performances in parks and concert halls without sound reinforcement technology are vastly different from a recorded LP played on one's home stereo equipment. They are also far removed from performing live in concert with the amplification that sound-reinforcement technology provided in the decades after the development of the microphone.

The process of copying the notation from the paper score into the computer is quite straightforward. Specifically, the author used a MIDI keystation and Sibelius computer notation software to transcribe the original Saint-Saëns work into an electronic copy in early January of

⁸ Robert Lindsay, "Professional Music in the 1920's and the Rise of the Singing Trombone," *Online Trombone Journal*: accessed April 4, 2014, <http://trombone.org/articles/library/viewarticles.asp?ArtID=275>.

2013. In order to begin work in a timely fashion, initial transcription was done from an electronic edition of the original found online while waiting for the arrival of an Urtext score.⁹ The decision whether or not to transpose the entire work from its original key of E major weighed on respecting the composer's intentions for the piece. While Saint-Saëns did compose the piece in editions for horn and violoncello in E major, those instruments both happen to perform quite well and naturally in that key. The violoncello, for example, takes advantage of its tuning in keys that favor the four sharps *E* contains. On the alto trombone, that key's tonic and dominant pitches happen to fall in slide positions in the most difficult-to-master stations on the instrument. Intending to ease the instability those pitches might suggest amongst journeyman performers, I transposed the entire piece into a comfortable key for the alto trombone. This satisfied Saint-Saëns' intention to make the piece lay naturally on the instruments for which he originally composed.

It was also necessary to rearrange phrases that extend beyond the alto trombone's range. Phrases that were too high or too low in the extreme were folded back into the usable range of the alto. Rather than simply raising or lowering the uncomfortable pitches one octave I sought to preserve Saint-Saëns' intentions as to peak and nadir of passage. This required shifting the phrase earlier and later to obscure the break with the original score. I elected to base my borrowed score on the slightly more difficult violoncello edition Saint-Saëns penned rather than the horn's. The final piece is attached below and self-published online via my website, www.TbonesPublishing.com. While the historical implications are important and will be given due consideration, the edition this project creates will take the alto trombone beyond its historical

⁹ Camille Saint-Saëns, "Romance in E Major Op. 67," in *Romanzen: Für Horn Und Klavier; Fassung Für Violoncello*, ed. Dominik Rahmer, Urtext ed. (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 2012), 5-17.

idiomatic expectations and capitalize on modern musician's ability to perform increasingly difficult music with the instrument.

Historical Considerations

Writing entirely new music is more difficult than borrowing from the existing works of earlier master musicians. Historical scores for other instruments are a convenient and ready source for material that fits the growing agility of the alto trombone. A properly borrowed work seeks to fortify the repertoire of the alto trombone while treating the composer's intentions for their work with as much respect and due diligence as possible.

Saint-Saëns completed his *Romance in E major Op. 67* in 1866.¹⁰ Though he meant the work for horn, he borrowed it from "an earlier cello piece, the fourth movement . . . from his five movement Suite Op. 16." The horn part was easily adapted from the violoncello edition because of the music's highly melodic content. For publication of Op. 67, Saint-Saëns finally created a violoncello part that was an extension of the new horn part but more idiomatically suited to the violoncello.

Borrowed works are common amongst the trombone family's repertoire. Examples are found with ease on the shelves of music stores, online catalogs, and in the collections of libraries. Of course there are many pieces composed expressly for the trombone as well. Focusing on borrowing provides practical methodological examples of the process.

This information about the practice of borrowing from other instruments for the trombone uncovered valuable editorial considerations that affect modern creators of musical scores. In addition, this research and experience guided a development of an idiomatic historical character

¹⁰ Saint-Saëns, *ibid.*

for the alto trombone, as well as the instrument's more contemporary musical developments. The research for this project sought a methodology to borrow a work from other instruments and provide easy access to it for other trombonists. In order to do that, it is necessary to compare the original and final product of music that has already been borrowed for the trombone. Three often-borrowed works for the trombone family that can be traced back to original manuscripts are W. A. Mozart's bassoon sonata, K. 292; various of Georg Philip Telemann's flute sonatas; and the collected vocalises of Marco Bordogni (commonly referred to as "the Rochut" collection by English-speaking trombonists today). These items provide insight into the trombone's capacity and the process of transferring a work from one musical medium to another.

W.A. Mozart's bassoon sonata is hardly altered except for exchanging "trombone" for "bassoon" at the top of the soloist's part.¹¹ The flute works of Telemann are often changed in both octave and often in key, and since they predate the piano and through-composed accompaniments, the preparation of a complete part for piano is necessary.¹² Some editorial decisions as to phrasing, dynamic, and articulation markings must be made in this process. For the purposes of borrowing for alto trombone, the general trend of editors to add more marks to pieces intended for young players and less to those intended for more advanced students is sensible. The Bordogni/Rochut collections of etudes are widely used amongst trombonists.¹³ They are borrowed from vocalises written for training singers in the art of song.

¹¹ Wolfgang A. Mozart, *Sonata in Bb Major, K. 292*, ed. Keith Brown (New York: International Music Company, 1968).

¹² Georg Philip Telemann, *Sonata in F Minor for Trombone and Piano*, ed. Allen Ostrander (New York: International Music Company, 1968).

¹³ Giulio Marco Bordogni, *Complete Vocalises for Trombone*, ed. Michael Mulcahy (Maple City, MI.: Encore Music, 2010).

There are several different published editions of each of the works discussed in the paragraph above. The expiration of copyright protection for deceased composers creates a market for living musicians to present the materials of those who have passed to a modern market. The various editions of the Bordogni, Mozart, and Telemann currently available all differ enough from each other to avoid copyright concerns but present essentially the same material. All of these texts are part of the tradition of borrowing and re-presenting musical material.

These examples of borrowing establish the legitimacy of the process and some guidelines for completing a borrowed score. In addition to this research the author's experience and study of the alto trombone's extant repertoire provide valuable insight to the project. All of these examples and experiences were judged and analyzed together in order to transfer the music of Saint-Saëns to fit the alto trombone as well as possible.

Modern History of the Alto Trombone

If there is such a thing as mainstream alto trombone thought today, it is amongst such a small portion of the population that one hesitates to discuss the idea. Generally, in the author's experience, most trombonists are introduced to the instrument late in their schooling. It is widely seen as an afterthought for advanced students or those with an especially strong interest in accurate performances of historical scores. However, the instrument is benefitting from the growth in the numbers of music students in university music programs around the United States. Increased competition for available seats in ensembles has led to increased specialization among successful candidates in those schools. There are many fine professional musicians who perform and record with the instrument, including the international virtuoso Christian Lindberg, as well

as Ronald Barron, the former principal trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Finally, most modern professional orchestra's trombone sections have the capacity to perform with alto trombone upon request from a conductor.

As early as the 1920s Tommy Dorsey had created a new style of trombone performance with five distinct aspects of tone because he was able to take advantage of the microphone.¹⁴ There is a broad enough international demand for brass music that several virtuosic performers are now taking advantage of both Dorsey's innovations with the microphone and the resurgent interest in alto trombone.

Christian Lindberg is one of those—a Swedish trombonist with a worldwide reputation due to his impressive resume replete with concert and recorded trombone solo concerto performances. Lindberg taught a masterclass that included the author and performed a concert with The Queensland Orchestra. His performance on the alto stunned the audience and inspired a passion for the diminutive trombone. The instrument's alto tones mimic the range of the human alto vocal range without being overbearing or pedantic. In Lindberg's hands it takes on a new character unique from the tenor trombone for its own lightness and flair. His performance of both Baroque and contemporary works presented the instrument's long history and bright future.¹⁵

Music schools and universities around the world graduate more and more qualified candidates for orchestral positions every year. At the same time the number of orchestras and positions for trombonists in those orchestras has dwindled. In this market the winners of auditions on trombone have tended to be those who can perform on both alto and tenor. For example, American recording artist Ronald Barron is a leader in the field of alto trombone

¹⁴ Lindsay, *ibid.*

¹⁵ *Christian Lindberg with The Queensland Orchestra*, Queensland Performing Arts Centre Concert Hall, Queensland, September 2007.

performance via landmark recordings and performances.¹⁶ In correspondence Mr. Barron thanked the author for sharing the piece; he did not offer more specific comments.¹⁷

Larry Zalkind, acclaimed pedagogue as well as live and recording artist on alto and tenor trombones, provided feedback on the piece. “Some of the low range writing could be tough for some of us alto players, but it's great to push the limits and expand the range of the alto.”¹⁸ The piece is “playable on alto” or tenor, but does not “utilize some of the high range ability of the alto.” Zalkind also suggested that the three clefs I used in the trombone part might frustrate some performers. I have since attached a version of the trombone part that utilizes alto clef much more heavily to the final edition of the score. I continue to include a version in my original clefs as well, as they were chosen for ease of reading by a performer well-versed in clef study and to minimize leger lines. The ease of modern score notation software makes these changes much less agonizing than they would be for musicians in the very recent past.

There are more historical sources that consider writing for the alto trombone specifically, including a notable mention by Berlioz,¹⁹ but the instrument has largely been neglected by most musicians since the power and reliability of large-bore Bb-tenor trombones become the preference of even the French orchestras at the end of the 20th century.²⁰ The tenor trombone overtook the alto; tenor can play most of the high range of the alto, is easier to play, and louder. In addition to this historical background specific to the instrument, a general knowledge of

¹⁶ Mike Hall, "An Evening from the 18th Century: A Review," *Online Trombone Journal*, 2004, <http://trombone.org/articles/library/viewarticles.asp?ArtID=280>.

¹⁷ Ronald Barron to Timothy Breckon, October 14, 2014, Personal Email.

¹⁸ "Link to Review," Larry Zalkind to Tim Breckon, October 16, 2014, Personal Email.

¹⁹ Hector Berlioz and Hugh Macdonald, *Berlioz's Orchestration Treatise: A Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 208-211.

²⁰ David Guion, "A Short History of the Trombone: The Operatic and Symphonic Traditions," *Online Trombone Journal*, October 2, 2004, <http://trombone.org/articles/library/sh4-opera.asp>.

editing, orchestration, transcription, arranging, organology, and performance practice must be used to justify decisions reached in the editorial process when writing for the alto trombone.

Upon consideration of these historical, and the previously discussed practical matters, the rubric attached to this paper was assembled. The rubric presents many of the ideas of this paper in a brief and graphic fashion as an introduction to preparing musical works for performance on alto trombone. Range, articulations, intervallic motion, and expressive phrasing are all important elements of the rubric. Various aspects of writing for alto trombone are analyzed along historical and practical lines. The rubric, figures 1 and 2 below, provides guidance to give a composer's original creation a beautiful and well-considered new setting on the alto trombone, with clear connections to the original material.

Conclusion

Musicians who play the trombone sound only one note at a time. Sounding that single note correctly requires a complete understanding of its place amongst the other musical tones (harmony). Such a thorough understanding demands a reverse engineering of music from a broader perspective than just one note at a time. The alto trombone is often seen as an anachronism, or even as an unnecessary historical oddity. Due to these and other factors, the alto trombonist has a limited number of original compositions to perform and study. The neglect alto trombone receives is undeserved, though benign in intent. The alto trombone remains a valid and valuable tool for creating music, reflected in its growing and continued use amongst professional musicians. Its technological development is nearly perfected, which gives it the tenor trombone's capacity for perfect and just pitch in nuanced performance. It is more melodic and less stentorian

than tenor and bass trombones. It performs in a higher musical range where idiomatic trombone sounds are especially desirable.

In order to begin solving this problem of neglect, I borrowed some music from history. Thus, I created and published an arrangement of Camille Saint-Saëns' *Romance in E Major Op. 67* for alto trombone and piano.²¹ In the process of creation I also assembled a rubric to create and publish further pieces for alto trombone. This makes it more accessible for others and myself to transcribe, arrange, and perform music with the instrument more often.

²¹ Camille Saint-Saens, *Romance for Alto Trombone and Piano*, ed. Timothy R. Breckon, Jr. (Muncie, IN.: Tbones, 2014), <http://tbonespublishing.com/2014/11/05/a-new-work-for-alto-trombone-and-piano-from-the-saint-saens/>.

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